

c—Épigraphie et histoire de l'art

NEW OBSERVATIONS ON THE FRESCOES AT MREN¹

by

CHRISTINA MARANCI

Tufts University

The church of Mren, completed c. 638/9 (Figs. 1, 2) and located in the Kars province of modern eastern Turkey, preserves in its sanctuary the fragmentary remains of wall painting, as many have observed.² The most substantial discussion of the program, to my knowledge, may be found in a 1971 essay on Mren by Jean-Michel and Nicole Thierry. They observed that a theophanic vision of Christ appears in the conch of the apse, with a row of apostles on the lateral walls, busts of prophets in medallions on the triumphal arch, and a bishop on the north wall of the apse. The fragmentary and faded condition of these paintings is acknowledged by the authors:

“On ne distingue vraiment qu’un fragment du visage et du buste du Christ au centre de l’abside, trois médaillons encadrant des visages de prophètes sur le versant Sud de la douelle et une figure d’évêque sur la paroi Nord du bras Est...”³

I had the good fortune of making two visits to the church in recent days.⁴ The resultant digital photography, it is hoped, offers a supplement to our knowledge of Mren.⁵ The following is a short report on the findings,

¹ This essay is dedicated to the memory of Nira Stone.

² For general commentary and bibliography on seventh-century Armenian painting, see Dournovo, 1957, 7-13 and 1979, 139-44; Der Nersessian, 1977, 69-75; and more recently Donabédian, 2008, 220-23. See also Kotandjian, 1978, although this author does not make mention of Mren.

³ Thierry, 1971, 77.

⁴ I was able to visit Mren on Tuesday, 25 June 2013 and again on Friday of the same week, 28 June 2013. The first time was with the assistance of Armen Aroyan, and the second visit was made with Steven Sim. I offer heartfelt thanks to both for getting me to Mren, and to the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR) for facilitating my trip.

⁵ I wish to thank Christine Cavalier of Tufts University for assisting me with preparing the photographs for this article.

which include heretofore unnoticed details of Christ in the apse, an almost complete identification of the apostolic group, new details of their figures, new epigraphic evidence in the medallions in the triumphal arch, and additional paintings on the south wall of the sanctuary and one of the eastern piers. These identifications are the result of 1) the ability to enhance digital photography to reveal greater information than is otherwise visible to the naked eye and 2) the greater illumination of the apse owing to the collapse of the south façade, and the enlargement of the southern apsidal window and both the north and west portals.

These findings are precious because of the relative paucity of seventh-century painting in Armenia. They are also precious because Mren is not generally accessible to scholars, due to its location in a restricted military zone close to the Armenian border. One hopes that this new evidence serves to heighten the urgency of stabilizing and preserving the church, which is now in precarious structural condition.

THE BUST OF CHRIST

As M. and Mme. Thierry noted, the bust of Christ, if fragmentary, is preserved sufficiently well to identify basic forms and contours (Fig. 3). Christ has a long, oval face and short dark beard, below which are darker modulations of color indicating the roundness of the neck. His lower garment, or *chiton*, is square-necked, and drapes in large, soft folds on his chest. On top of this garment is a robe-like *himation*. Traces of pigment suggest that the himation was purple. Short thin paint strokes are used as fill on the right edge of his garment, and, in a succession of arcs on the lower arm, to indicate roundness. The halo contained a cruciform design; only its left arm is now visible. This “arm” is actually made up of a set of around twelve horizontal strokes.

While much of the body of Christ no longer survives, a few suggestions may be made regarding its original disposition. A close examination of the digital photography reveals that the left and right shoulders of Christ are not of equal height: while the outline of his left shoulder curves downwards, that of his right shoulder curves upward. This suggests that the Christ appeared originally raising his right hand in benediction, as has been suggested also for the fragmentary figure of Christ in the apse of the domed hall of Aruč, constructed c. 660.⁶

⁶ See the reconstruction drawing of N. Kotandjian in Donabédian, 2008, 222, fig. 435 and Mat'evosyan, 1987, 48, fig. 3.

THE SANDALED FOOT AND PEDESTAL OF CHRIST, AND THE VINE RINCEAU

Not only the bust of Christ remains. I have been able to identify his right lower leg, his foot, and a jeweled pedestal (Fig. 4). The lower leg is covered in soft large folds draping down towards the left of the image; here, as in the case of the arm, curved lines are used to indicate the roundness of the limb. The garment is hemmed at the top of the foot. The foot, which is shown slightly foreshortened, is long and elegant (Fig. 5). The remains of a sandal are also evident: it is fastened to the foot with string-like straps. The ankle appears to be enclosed with a V-shape strap which runs down the foot and between the first two toes, while another strap surrounds the instep of the foot. Deep flesh-toned pigment can still be discerned in this area.

Below the foot is preserved a jeweled box-like pedestal. The foreshortened position of the pedestal is indicated in part by a series of diagonal hatchmarks on its upper surface. The sides of the pedestal are ornamented with two tiers of large blue-green squares, which are richly framed with small reddish-purple circles.

This lower part of the figure of Christ bears striking resemblance to the fragment of apsidal fresco at Aruč (Fig. 6). The painting at Aruč is in better condition, preserving the length of the body of Christ from the thighs down to the pedestal, as well as an open scroll to the right inscribed with a text from John 14:21.⁷ A comparison, however, of the images at Aruč and Mren shows a clear correspondence in the position, proportions, and painterly treatment of the foot, the typology of the sandal, and the two-tiered, jeweled pedestal.⁸

It seems quite likely, that at Mren, as at Aruč, Christ was depicted standing, a suggestion furthered by the considerable distance between the head and feet of the figure, and by the absence of any evidence for a throne on the preserved left-hand side of the image. If L. Dournovo is right in her argument that the apse of Art'ik also once featured an image of the standing Christ, then one may imagine a total of three such apsidal compositions in seventh-century Armenia — that is, half of the surviving examples. At the large church of T'alin, Lmbat, and Surb Step'annos at Koš, Christ appears enthroned.⁹

⁷ “He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him” (KJV).

⁸ Donabédian, 221

⁹ See Dournovo, 1957, 12 and Donabédian, 2008, 220. Der Nersessian had noted the rarity of this scene: “la variante où il est debout n’était connue jusqu’à présent que par

As at Aruč, a vine rinceau provides the groundline for the image of Christ (see **Figure 5**). At Aruč, the rinceau is formed of repeating sequence of acanthus leaves, which are contained within a horizontal register defined by upper and lower colored bands. At Mren the effect is more organic: the rinceau is also framed within bands, but it emerges from behind the pedestal as a woody stem, as if growing from the foot of Christ, offering a visual expression of John 15: 1, “I am the true vine.” Above the right-hand trio of apostles, the rinceau is once more visible, and reveals here undulations and also leaves and fruits (**Fig. 7**). The fruits appear to be sectioned vertically like melons. Below this rinceau is another horizontal register, appearing just above the heads of the apostles, but what this zone contained is no longer clear.

THE APOSTLES

Below the image of Christ, in the zone of the three windows, is a row of figures identifiable as an apostolic group. While mention has been made of the existence of this group, the digital photography presented here offers new information for consideration. There appear to be eight figures in total: three to the left of the left apsidal window (**Fig. 8, 8a**), two flanking the central window, and three to the right of the right-hand window. Their busts are framed in medallions and bear, to the side, onomastic inscriptions in *erkat’agir*. These texts are incised into the wall surface, and were probably also painted. The left hand group is, from left to right, Philip (*ՓիլիփՈՒ*) (**Fig. 9**), Matthew (*ՄԱԹԵՒՈՒ*) (**Fig. 10**), and John (*ՅՈՎԱՆՆԻՈՒ*). The right-hand single figure is Peter (*ՊԵՏՐՈՒ*) (**Fig. 11**). The right-hand trio consists, from left to right, of Mark (*ՄԱՐԿՈՒ*), Luke (*ՂՈՒԿԱՆ*), and Thaddeus (*ԹԱԴԵՈՒ*) (**Fig. 12**). Damage to the left-hand single figure prevents the possibility of identification. One may reasonably assume that it is Paul, as has been suggested for the figure on the west portal lintel who stands opposite Peter and to the left of Christ (**Fig. 13**).

All the apostles at Mren have been defaced. Nevertheless, close observation of the digital photography allows for some deductions regarding their original appearance. The figures are both haloed and their busts are

un seul monumental, celui de l’église S. Andrea in Cantabarbara à Rome, la fresque de T’alich montre que cette variante étaient connue également dans l’Orient chrétien” (1977, 72).

enclosed in medallions. The heads are proportionately small, and the necks are muscular, with subtle modulation indicating roundness. Peter, the best preserved of the group, has short grey hair that reveals a high forehead; he also appears to have a short beard (see **Fig. 11**). The figures wear draped garments which fall in vertical folds down one shoulder, and which create a square opening for the neck. At least some of the figures appear to be in three-quarters (Matthew, Peter, Luke).

While circular medallions frame the busts of these figures, they were in fact rendered as full-length figures, as a few faint details show. Some distance below the bust of Phillip is a hand holding a closed scroll (see **Fig. 8, 8a**). Mark's right hand, emerging from long flowing drapery, is barely visible (see **Figure 12**). The right hand of Peter is also visible, just next to the central window — with it he points upward towards the figure of Christ (**Figure 14, 14a**). Peter's left hand is also faintly visible. It is held low and closed around an indeterminate object colored yellow-gold like the halos — perhaps a key, as he holds in the relief of the west portal lintel. The upper body of Peter seems to be leaning towards the center of the apse, as though he were striding forward. The proportions of these figures are naturalistic, if not slightly elongated, with small heads, and soft modulations of color on skin and on drapery. The effect, as much as one can glean from the evidence, is of an elegant illusionistic style, and to judge from Peter, of a dynamic scene including figures in movement.

THE MEDALLIONS IN THE TRIUMPHAL ARCH

The outer face of the triumphal arch bears the remains of an inscription, but very few letters are now visible. I read the longest sequence of visible letters as an ending EAC'N (*bU.8t*) (**Fig. 15**). On the inner face, or soffit, of the arch are a series of busts in medallions. Although only three remain, positioned on the right side of the apse, there were most likely originally twelve that decorated this zone. M. and Mme. Thierry have already discussed these busts, of which the uppermost offers the best preserved physiognomy of any painted figure at Mren.

As the Thierrys note, the medallions form a kind of rinceau in which two bands intersect to form a set of circles (**Figure 16**). At their intersection is a short bolster-like joint which flairs out at its edges. The figures are shown bust-length and wearing draperies. Two of the three busts preserve onomastic inscriptions next to their heads; in this case, entirely

within the frame of the medallions, and divided along each side of the figures' heads. Neither of the inscriptions is complete. The Thierrys made the suggestion that the topmost figure was Joel (ՅՈՎԵԼ) based on letters visible to them, but the digital photography shows that this is not possible. To the right of the head of the topmost figure can be discerned four letters: *Ա-Յ-Ե-Լ* — (AYĒL). The digital photography also reveals two letters of the inscription in the medallion below: *Ա-Ք* (AK'). If we presume, as seems most likely based on the comparative evidence from Byzantium and Armenia, that the twelve medallions in the triumphal arch are prophets, I propose that the top figure may be Jacob, also known as Israel/ (Arm. *ԻՒՐԱՅԻԼ*) and, with more confidence, that the lower figure is Malachi, known in Armenian as Malak' / *ՄԱԼԱԿ* *ՈՒՔ*.¹⁰

The Thierrys have already made several physiognomic observations with regard to the topmost figure:

“le visage de trois-quarts est d'un modelé rude, le nez busqué est trace avec vigueur ; les détails de l'œil, les paupières, les arcades sourcilières, la bouche, en partie dissimulée par la moustache, sont dessinés avec réalisme.”¹¹

Because of the way the painting has deteriorated, inverting the colors of the photograph (essentially creating a negative) allows a greater sense of the facial features of this figure (Fig. 17). The face is long, with large, almond-shaped eyes, a long nose with fleshy nostrils, full lips, and a long wispy moustache and pointed beard. Sideburns curl in tendrils, and the long hair is carefully articulated by parallel and right-angle lines. The lined forehead and furrowed brow, together with the limpid gaze, convey the visionary abilities of the figure.¹²

THE BISHOPS

The Thierrys identified a clerical figure on the north wall of the sanctuary. This is the only surviving full-length figure at Mren, and it is framed in a painted rectangular panel. It is situated on the northern pilaster of the sanctuary, and the pilaster capital above the head of the cleric curves toward the viewer, as if to shelter the figure.¹³ As the Thierrys noted, the figure is bearded and wears an omophorion, tunic, and chausible. In

¹⁰ I thank Robert Dulgarian for the suggestion regarding Israyēl.

¹¹ Thierry, 1971, 76.

¹² For comparative images and discussion see Thierry, 1971, 76-77.

¹³ This is not unlike the way the tops of later medieval xac'k'ars are carved.

his covered left hand he holds a book which is supported by the fingers of his right hand (**Fig. 18**)

One may also identify a figure on the corresponding south wall. Although almost completely defaced, one clue remains to identify both the existence of a figure and its episcopal identity: the omophorion (**Fig. 19, 19a**). Towards the hem of the figure is a rectangular panel of cloth, which is edged in horizontal lines and terminates in a fringe. This figure too was framed in a rectangular panel, and so the two bishops faced each other across the sanctuary of the apse.

FRAGMENT OF A SAINT

On the east face of the southwest dome pier, one additional figure may be discerned. It is not at eye level, but appears below the capital of the pilaster. Only the upper left-hand corner of the painting is preserved. What remains suggests a rectangular panel framed in red (**Fig. 20**). Within is the fragmentary head of a figure. The right eye is large and almond-shaped, and the brow above is prominent and thick. Next to the face, in faint lettering, is the inscribed word “SURB” (*ՍՈՒԲ*). To the left of figure is a narrow band, presumably a kind of lateral framing device for the figure. Although this zone is very badly damaged, one may still discern faint traces, in yellow-gold pigment, of a star or floral ornament. This form is reminiscent of the lateral border decorations of sixth-century icons in Sinai, including the encaustic panels of the bust of Christ and of the Virgin, Child, and Saints.¹⁴

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

These new findings allow for some preliminary conclusions. First, one may note a visual correspondence between the imagery in the sanctuary and on the west portal lintel of Mren. The lintel bears a lateral row of figures including Christ, Peter, (most likely) Paul, a cleric, and two princely figures. Walking through the west portal, one is confronted in the sanctuary again with Christ and the apostolic group, with Peter positioned lower than, but also to the immediate right of Christ. In both the wall painting and the relief sculpture, draperies are conceived with square

¹⁴ See Mathews, 1988, figs. 27 and 34.

necks, as a comparison of the two images of Christ demonstrate. The clerical figure on the lintel, standing to the right of Peter, recalls, in his frontal stance and book, the episcopal portraits on the north and south walls of the sanctuary. At the same time, a comparison of the images of Peter show that the frontal and static image of the saint on the relief is replaced, on the interior, with a figure in movement, who leans forward and actively points to the image of Christ above.

Second, the imagery at Mren demonstrates clear relations with the later seventh-century church of Aruč. As we have discussed, the foot, pedestal, and rinceau arrangement preserved at Mren bears close resemblance to that of Aruč, suggesting that the former may have served as an iconographic model for the latter. This visual relationship also holds broader implications, particularly because both the monuments may be securely dated. While Mren was built during the reign of Heraclius, Aruč was constructed during the first years of Arab occupation. The patron of the church, Grigor Mamikonean, was a client of the Umayyad caliph, Mu'āwiya period¹⁵ The close correspondence between the two apsidal images thus offers further support to claims for the continuity of cultural traditions in Armenia during the first decades of the Arab conquest.¹⁶

Third, the new fresco fragments serve further to confirm the correspondences between the Mren paintings and early Byzantine art made by Thierrys in 1971:

“Nous voyons donc à propos de ces quelques morceaux de peintures qu'ils se rattachent à leurs homologues grecs, leur style, empreint de rudesse, conservant cependant quelque originalité. Il est intéressant de voir, en effet, que la peinture arménienne du VII^e siècle est une forme particulière de l'art post-justinien.”¹⁷

The subtle modulations of color, graceful figures, and attention to naturalism evident in the frescoes at Mren speak to a sophisticated and illusionistic style which may be compared with painting and mosaic in contemporary Constantinople, Ravenna, Rome, and Sinai. The portrait on the southwest pier also demonstrates that the fresco paintings of seventh-century Armenia were not necessarily limited to the apsidal curvature, but extended into the nave of the church.¹⁸ Further, the presence of an ecclesiastic on the south wall of the sanctuary (as well as the north) demonstrates a sensitivity not

¹⁵ Greenwood, 2008, 67.

¹⁶ Garsoian, 2009; Greenwood, 2008.

¹⁷ Thierry, 1971, 77.

¹⁸ For other such examples, see also Donabédian, 2008, 221.

only to symmetrical pairings but also to the power of such a pairing to create a meaningful iconographic axis across the space of the sanctuary. This approach, which highlights the dynamic relationship of architecture, painting, and liturgy, formed part of Byzantine church decoration from an early date. Finally, if I am right in identifying a floral ornament on the frame of the saintly portrait on the southeast pier, interesting questions emerge about the relation between Armenia and Byzantine icon painting. To what extent did the painters at Mren appropriate artistic conventions known from early Byzantine icons, and how and why did this happen?¹⁹ In sum, the frescoes at Mren afford important new insight into the seventh-century Armenian painted program and its relations with neighboring traditions. Surely, more first-hand investigation is necessary; one only hopes that the church will remain standing long enough to allow it.

¹⁹ This question has been raised by Thomas F. Mathews in a series of articles and lectures. See for example, Mathews, 2008-9. The frescoes at Mren, and particularly the framed image of the saint on the southeast pier, would seem to offer further support to Mathews' argument for the role of icons in Armenian artistic and worship practices during the early medieval period.



Fig. 1. Mren, c. 638/9. View from southwest.



Fig. 2. Mren, interior to east.



Fig. 3. Mren, apse, the bust of Christ.



Fig. 4. Mren, fragment of lower body of Christ.



Fig. 5. Mren, foot and pedestal of Christ.



Fig. 6. Aruč, c. 660, remains of apsidal painting.



Fig. 7. Mren, remains of vine rinceau, right side.



Fig. 8. Mren, left-hand apostolic group.



Fig. 8a. Line drawing of Fig. 8.



Fig. 9. Mren, Phillip.



Fig. 10. Mren, Matthew.



Fig. 11. Mren, Peter.



Fig. 12. Mren, right-hand apostolic group. Mark, Luke, and Thaddeus.



Fig. 13. Mren, west portal lintel.



Fig. 14. Mren, Peter, half-length figure.

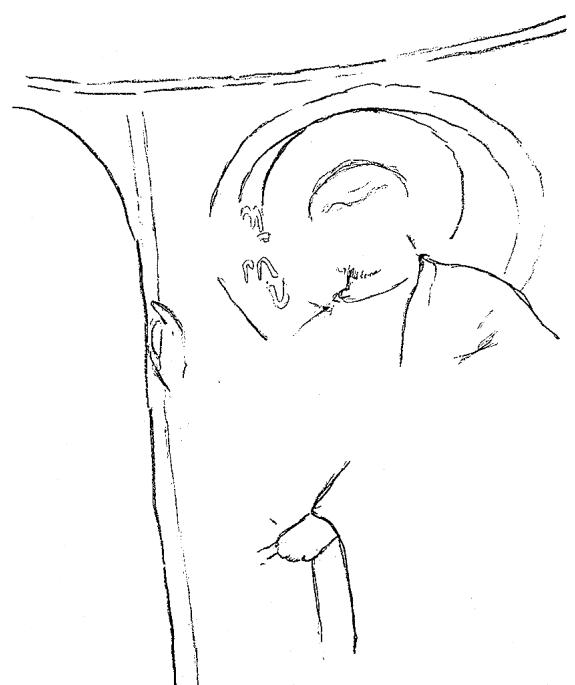


Fig. 14a. Line drawing of Fig. 14.



Fig. 15. Mren, triumphal arch with fragmentary painted inscription.

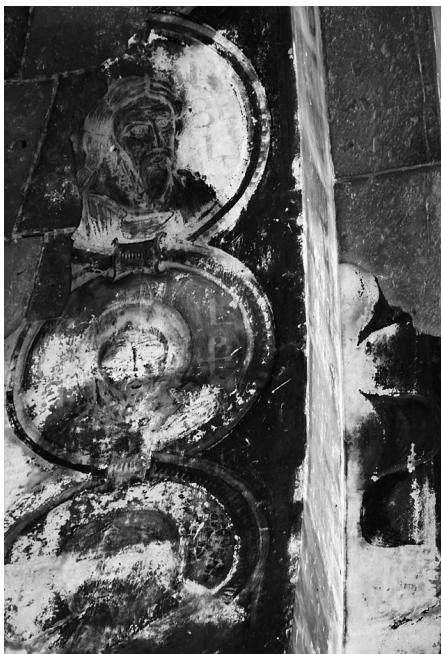


Fig. 16. Mren, triumphal arch, prophets in medallions.



Fig. 17. Mren, photograph of prophet using color inversion.



Fig. 18. Mren, north wall of sanctuary, bishop.



Fig. 19. Mren, south wall of sanctuary, bishop.

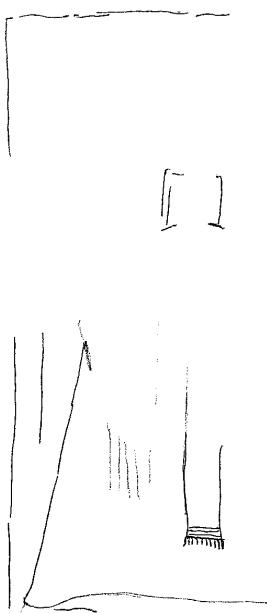


Fig. 19a. Line drawing of Fig. 19.



Fig. 20. Mren, eastern face of southeast dome pier, framed portrait of saint.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

DONABÉDIAN, Patrick
 2008 *L'âge d'or de l'architecture arménienne* (Marseille: Parenthèses)

DER NERSESSIAN, Sirarpie
 1977 *L'art arménien* (Paris: Arts et Métiers Graphiques)

DOURNOVO, Lydia
 1957 *Kratkaia istoria drevnearmianskoi jivopissi* [Brief history of ancient Armenian painting] (Erevan: Armenian State Press).
 1979 *Otcherki izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva srednevekovoï Armenii* [Essays on the figurative art of Armenia] (Moscow: Iskusstvo).

GARSOÏAN, Nina G.
 2009 “L'interrègne arménien: esquisse préliminaire,” *Le Muséon*, 22 (2009): 81-92; repr. in *Studies on the Formation of Christian Armenia* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010).

GREENWOOD, Tim
 2008 “A Corpus of Early Medieval Armenian Inscriptions,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004), 27-91.

KOTANDJIAN, Nicolaï
 1978 “Fresques arméniennes du VII^e siècle,” in *Atti del quinto simposio internazionale di arte armena* (Venice: San Lazzaro), 376-80.

KOUYMJIAN, Dickran
 1997 “Identifying the Apostles in Armenian Art”, *From Byzantium to Iran: Armenian Studies in Honor of Nina G. Garsoian*, eds. J.-P. Mahé and R.W. Thomson, Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 453-475

MATEVOSYAN, Karen
 1987 *Aruč* (Erevan: “Hayastan”).

MATHEWS, Thomas F.
 1998 *Byzantium: From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1998).
 2008/9 “Vrt'anēs K'ert'ol and the Early Theology of Images,” *REArm* 31 (2008/9), 101-26.

THIERRY, Jean-Michel and Nicole
 1971 “La cathédrale de Mren et sa décoration,” *Cahiers archéologiques* (1971), 43-77.